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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BUCHAREST 001072

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SUBJECT: SUPREME DEFENSE COUNCIL NIXES PRIME MINISTER'S
CALL TO WITHDRAW ROMANIAN TROOPS FROM IRAQ

REF: BUCHAREST 1058

Classified By: DCM Mark Taplin for Reasons 1.4(a), (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Romania's Supreme Council for National Defense (CSAT) flatly rejected June 30 the unexpected call by Prime Minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu and Defense Minister Teodor Atanasiu for a Romanian troop pullout from Iraq. (Ref) Announcing the CSAT's decision, President Basescu rebuked Tariceanu, Atanasiu and other members of the National Liberal Party (PNL) for undermining Romania's international credibility. Basescu reaffirmed Romania's strong strategic relationship with the United States as well as its links to the EU. Following the CSAT decision, the PM reaffirmed his call for a troop withdrawal, asserting that Romania had completed its mission in Iraq. Leaders of the opposition center-left Social Democratic Party (PSD), however, criticized the PM and his supporters for an "unprofessional" approach to foreign policy. Foreign Minister Ungureanu, who has lined up against the Prime Minister despite their common party affiliation, told the Ambassador that the Prime Minister's political gambit was entirely improvised, and that he and his Defense Minister did not expect the harsh reaction to which they have been subjected. End Summary.

Basescu Blasts PM - CSAT Rejects Iraq Withdrawal Bid

¶2. (C) A subdued but confident Basescu appeared live on national TV on June 30 to announce that the Supreme Council for National Defense (CSAT) had rejected by a 9 to 2 vote the previous day's call by Prime Minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu and Defense Minister Teodor Atanasiu for a withdrawal of Romania's troops from Iraq. Acknowledging that Romania was discussing with its coalition partners "reconfiguring" Romania's troop presence in Iraq, Basescu made it clear that the CSAT had flatly rejected the call for a withdrawal. (He was referring to London discussions among U.K., Italian and Australian representatives on June 23 in which Romania had indicated it would "reconfigure" its troops in Iraq participating in coalition activities from 784 to 628 personnel.) Basescu also acknowledged that a public debate was necessary regarding Romania's role in Iraq, but the solution was "not to flee" from peacekeeping and stability operations. "Romania must demonstrate seriousness and stability in its international relations," Basescu continued and "must not base foreign policy on emotion...nor change its policy overnight." Basescu chided the PM for a "lack of coherence in foreign and military policies" and for failing to consult with him, other members of the GOR and coalition partners. He also criticized the PM and DefMin for failing to present an "analysis" to the CSAT explaining the basis and potential consequences of their recommendation for a withdrawal.

¶3. (C) Basescu singled out for criticism National Liberal Party (PNL) Tariceanu loyalist and Chamber of Deputies President Bogdan Olteanu who in televised remarks earlier in the day had tried to justify his mentor's call for a withdrawal from Iraq to the ostensible opposition of the EU to the war in Iraq. Basescu reaffirmed the centrality of the U.S.-Romanian strategic relationship, noting that Romania needs "strong relations" with both the United States and Europe and the "EU and the U.S. need each other." He stressed that, despite initial criticism from some EU states of Romania's engagement in Iraq, most European states now accept Romania's position. He faulted Olteanu for demonstrating a "lack of understanding" and undermining Romanian credibility.

¶4. (C) Basescu's June 30 statements following the CSAT meeting were presaged in a June 29 nationally televised interview in which a visibly angry Romanian president accused the PM of undermining Romania's national security interests and seeking to destroy Romania's good relations with the U.S. and UK. He noted that the U.S., and NATO, guaranteed Romania's national security. Basescu added that he "reproaches" himself for appointing Tariceanu PM, whom he accused of failing to carry out needed reforms of government institutions.

FM Ungureanu: Stunned By PM's "Off-the-Cuff" Initiative

¶5. (C) Foreign Minister Mihai-Razvan Ungureanu told the Ambassador on June 30 that Basescu conducted today's CSAT meeting in an "impeccable, calm, tactful and mature fashion." According to the FM, DefMin Atanasiu attempted to present a "memorandum" in support of a troop withdrawal from Iraq.

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Instead, Basescu insisted that Atanasiu submit a "defense capabilities report," which Romanian law requires the Defense Minister to present each year to the CSAT by June 30. The meeting was adjourned, for about one hour, to allow Atanasiu time to retrieve the report from his office at the Defense Ministry. (It was duly approved by the CSAT, but both Basescu and the Romanian media took note of the Defense Minister's lack of preparation.)

¶6. (C) Per Ungureanu, the PM presented a "political justification" for his proposed withdrawal, asserting that a continued Romanian troop presence unnecessarily risked Romanian lives and was too costly. Tariceanu also argued "other European countries have withdrawn from Iraq and lost nothing thereby." Basescu retorted that the question of Romanian deployments was a matter "for analysis, not politics, and requires a military assessment." All CSAT participants, except the heads of the internal and external intelligence services, offered their views during the meeting. The FM said he argued the PM/DefMin proposal had been improperly launched in the public arena without appropriate consultation. In a break with the CSAT tradition of consensus-based decision-making, Basescu called for a "symbolic vote" on the issue of whether Romania should withdraw troops from Iraq. Only the PM and DefMin voted in favor of withdrawal. Ungureanu told the Ambassador, without elaborating, that in the course of the CSAT meeting the PM appeared very uncomfortable and "became aware of his mistake", but Ungureanu predicted that the PM would not publicly admit his error.

¶7. (C) Ungureanu also confirmed other reports that many PNL party leaders were "taken by surprise" and "shocked" by the PM's June 29 announcement. Even many within the PM's entourage "did not know what happened," Ungureanu related. He said he himself was "stunned" and confided to the Ambassador that he was still considering resignation as FM if Tariceanu did not backtrack. Ungureanu said the PM met with senior party leaders, including the FM and fellow CSAT member, Finance Minister Sebastian Vladescu, prior to the

meeting. The FM insisted that the PNL's senior leadership, except for the DefMin, expressed their opposition to the PM's call for a withdrawal. Ungureanu opined that the PM's June 29 announcement was the product of a last minute, "off the cuff" decision; both the PM and DefMin "did not anticipate" the resulting brouhaha.

PM, Defense Minister Stick to Their Guns

¶8. (C) In a televised press conference from PNL headquarters a few hours after the CSAT decision, Tariceanu reaffirmed his call for a troop withdrawal, asserting that the time was ripe for a withdrawal as "our mission in Iraq draws to a close." With the DefMin seated to his right, Tariceanu complained that the CSAT decision had attempted to "close the debate" on Romania's Iraq deployment. He characterized this a "mistake" and called for a referendum on Romania's overseas military presence, including in Iraq. The PM defended his decision not to consult with other GOR officials, averring that "certain steps" needed to be taken. In what was likely a veiled threat aimed at dissident PNL members, Tariceanu said future PNL meetings would examine the "problem" of party members who had opposed the proposal to withdraw. (Note. This was probably a reference to, inter alia, Foreign Minister Mihai-Razvan Ungureanu and Finance Minister Sebastian Vladescu, both PNL and CSAT members, who opposed the call to withdraw. End Note.)

The Liberal Reaction

¶9. (C) The Prime Minister's PNL loyalists trotted out various explanations for the PM's actions, some of which were more plausible than others. Chamber of Deputies President Bogdan Olteanu, a close confidante of Tariceanu and the most senior PNL official aside from the PM himself, was the most active public voice calling for a Romanian withdrawal from Iraq, which he linked to Romania's EU commitments. In a June 30 meeting with Olteanu, PolChief expressed dismay that neither the GOR nor the PNL -- with which the Embassy has maintained a regular dialogue -- had consulted with the U.S. or other partners prior to the call for an Iraq withdrawal. It was particularly surprising in light of the PM and DefMin's repeated assurances that Romanian troops would remain in Iraq as long as they were needed and that no changes would be made without prior consultation. Even European diplomats without troops in Iraq had called the Embassy to express concern

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about Romania's reliability as a partner.

¶10. (C) Olteanu acknowledged that that the PM and DefMin's proposal had similarly taken many in his party off-guard, but that the PNL leadership had made the decision in light of public opposition to and concern for the high cost of the troop presence in Iraq. Olteanu apologized for any "misunderstanding" by the U.S. or others with regard to Romanian intentions, which he claimed were not intended to bring into question Romania's commitment as a NATO ally or strategic partner in other areas. At the same time, he admitted that the proposal was based "just as much on domestic politics" as it was on the PNL's views about military spending priorities. He insisted that the PNL had learned Basescu was himself on the brink of announcing a drawdown of Romanian troops in Iraq, and that Tariceanu sought to "steal the wind" from the president on the issue. He also asserted that the PM believed that the U.S. had come to "overly focus" on the staunchly pro-American president. He lamented that the U.S. dialogue with the PM was "thin" and had overly emphasized negative aspects of our bilateral relationship. This, he stressed, had also been part of the PM's calculations in launching his proposal for a Romanian withdrawal from Iraq. highlight. At the same time, Olteanu said he would seek to keep the debate over Romania's contribution in Iraq did not lapse into broader anti-American rhetoric. He said he would also work to keep the issue from

impacting other areas in our bilateral relationship.

¶11. (C) Other PNL officials were more forthcoming in admitting that the PM had made a mistake in not consulting more widely, including with U.S. and U.K. officials. Still, PNL Deputy and party youth leader Cristian Adomnitei insisted to PolMilOff that a "public discussion" about Iraq was necessary, and Tariceanu had launched that discussion. PolMilOff countered that the PM and DefMin had, in fact, launched not a discussion but a surprise attack on both their political rival Basescu and Romania's long-standing, bipartisan policy of Euro-Atlantic engagement.

Opposition Rejects "Frivolous," "Unprofessional" Approach

¶12. (C) Senate Foreign Relations Committee President and President of the center-left opposition Social Democratic Party (PSD) Mircea Geoana told the Ambassador June 30 that he was "outraged" by the PM's and DefMin's "frivolous orchestration" of the call to withdraw from Iraq. Noting that DefMin Atanasiu failed to disclose the withdrawal plan to both the President and parliamentary leaders, Geoana stated that PSD would call for his resignation. He observed that strategic decisions needed to be handled "institutionally" and transparently, not through political showmanship. Geoana predicted, however, that the PM would not back down on his political gamble but would continue to call for a complete withdrawal from Iraq based on the financial and human cost to Romania of a continued deployment.

¶13. (C) Senate Defense Committee President and senior PSD member George Cristian Maior likewise emphasized that it was imperative for Romania to have "a predictable international policy." Alluding to his own tenure as MOD State Secretary under the previous PSD-led government, Maior continued that "we worked very hard" to establish a strong security relationship with the U.S. and it was "unprofessional" and "contrary to the spirit of our alliance" for the PM and DefMin to announce support for withdrawal from Iraq without first speaking with the USG, HMG and other coalition partners. He predicted that the CSAT would maintain Romania's troop presence in Iraq and the current flurry of media attention would pass "within three days."

¶14. (C) Comment. Although polling indicates that many Romanians oppose a troop presence in Iraq, public opposition to Romania's engagement has been muted. Support for the strategic partnership with the U.S., on the other hand, remains strong across the political spectrum and has been the centerpiece of Romania's foreign policy under the last three presidential administrations. Ironically, the PNL has in fact long been a strong proponent of U.S.-Romanian strategic links. Consequently, many even in the PNL were taken aback by Tariceanu's unexpected move. A number of PNL insiders have suggested to us privately that Tariceanu's position against a Romanian troop presence in Iraq reflects less a policy conviction than a poorly calculated attempt to gain the upper hand in his ongoing political feud with Basescu. We have heard, as well, about the Prime Minister's

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resentment over the close engagement Washington has with his rival Basescu. The fact that Basescu will travel to Washington in July for a second official visit, while the Prime Minister has not yet earned a trip, also grates. Tariceanu's failure to consult in advance on this proposal, even with his closest advisors, lends credence to Ungureanu's assertion that the PNL President made up his mind at the last minute, and with little consideration of the long-term consequences of his statement. It is possible that this latest political stumble by the Prime Minister could prove to be fatal, although he has displayed surprising staying power until now. While we can feel some measure of satisfaction at Basescu's political strength and his skillful handling of this unexpected challenge from the Prime Minister and his

Defense Minister ally, the episode has brought the question of Romania's continued military presence in Iraq to the front burner of public debate.

TAUBMAN